



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Shaky Vikings heading into conference play

The St. Johns River State College baseball team can be found in its usual place among the state's top 10 with a couple of the state's statistical leaders with the Mid-Florida Conference opener coming up Saturday at Seminole State College.

That's no assurance the Vikings are going to be in their usual place in the state tournament once conference play is over.

They've gone the last five years – from 2013-15 as conference champion, the last two as runnerup – but not only is the league looking tougher this year, the postseason format has been tweaked. The champion still automatically qualifies, but the second-, third- and fourth-place teams are now thrown into a conference tournament to decide the other berth.

What's most concerning heading into the conference season, however, is that the Vikings are a shaky 13-6.

SJR State coach Ross Jones is blunt: "I think we're a long way from being a very good team."

Outside of sizzling sophomore Kerry Carpenter, who leads the state in batting average (.560) and RBI (33) and is second in home runs with eight, St. Johns batters are all over the place. Sophomores Jimmy Goldsmith (.393) and Joey Bellini (.338) are swinging healthy bats, but aside from Justin Farmer (.298), none of the freshman regulars are hitting as high as .250, which isn't a good thing when most of the regulars are freshmen.

"They'll have a good week and then they'll go 0-20," Jones said. "Offensively is where we are susceptible against the better arms in the conference. Against 1 and 2 starters, we're in trouble."

Jones has little latitude to tweak the lineup, having lost big-hitting catcher Jorge Ramirez for the season with a torn ACL. Speedy outfielder Ray Gonzalez is still a few weeks away and third baseman Nick Romano just returned to the lineup Wednesday as a designated hitter. He's still not ready defensively.

"Depth is an issue," Jones said. "Guys that should be a fourth outfielder or fifth infielder are having to play every day. We've got one catcher. If we DH Nick, we lose Bubba Sangster and his pop."

"Scoring and generating offense is where we've struggled the most. We have not had one game where every at-bat was competitive. That's what we're working on."

The Vikings tore it up Wednesday, collecting 10 extra-base hits in a 9-5 road win over the Rollins College junior varsity, but there was a situation where a runner failed to break on a 3-2 pitch with two out.

"Everyone in the stadium knows you're going and he doesn't go," Jones said. "This is a baseball IQ deal. We have guys who are told to take pitches and swing on 2-0. You make five of those mistakes and at the end of the day, those mistakes are going to cost you a run. It's stuff we do in practice over and over."

The pitching has been far more stable. Luke Sutko leads the state with six saves and has a 1.32 ERA. Setup man Jagger McCoy is 1-0 with 1.13 ERA. But Darin Kilfoyl, the projected No. 1 starter when practice began in January, spent three and a half weeks on the shelf before starting and going two innings at Rollins.

"He's going next Wednesday as our No. 3 on a 50-pitch limit. It's a process," Jones said. "But you can't win without a bullpen and that is where we have some depth. We have 12 arms that can be competitive."

"Jaison Heard (1-1, 2.38) has not had a bad outing. Elijah Gill (3-1, 5.50) has pitched well except for Miami Dade. With Kilfoyl back, (Matt) Marini and (Zach) Blankenship go back to the bullpen."

There was a considerable elephant in the room last weekend, when Jones suspended so many players for an unspecified violation of team rules that St. Johns didn't have enough healthy bodies to field a competitive team in its own Capital City Bank Classic, which went ahead with four other teams.

"We've moved forward," Jones said.

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ANDY HALL
Sports Editor 312-5239

AHall@Palatkadailynews.com

Hall

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"We lose sight sometimes that these are kids. I spent 15 years in the university setting (Florida, Vanderbilt, North Florida) and I'm as realistic as anybody in the world."

So it's back to baseball and back to negotiating a steep learning curve, not only against two-time defending conference champion Santa Fe, but Seminole and Central Florida teams that appear to be much improved. Daytona State had a 12-game win streak broken just Wednesday, but much of the competition has been suspect.

"I'm not nearly as concerned about other teams as my own problems," Jones said. "I don't think we've played our best baseball yet, but I do feel we're able to compete in conference."

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.